

***Whispers in the Pines: The Secrets of Colliers Mills* by Karen F. Riley**

Submitted by Ben Ruset on Wed, 11/21/2007 - 10:33pm.

When one thinks of the Pine Barrens, one thinks of Wharton State Forest, Byrne State Forest, the Forked River Mountains, and a thousand other places in South Jersey. Colliers Mills Wildlife Management Area, on the border of the Pine Barrens, is frequently not thought of, which is a shame because it's one of the most beautiful places in the Pine Barrens.

Whispers in the Pines: The Secrets of Colliers Mills by Karen F. Riley is an attempt to raise awareness of Colliers Mills to both Pine Barrens enthusiasts and the general public.

The author's interest in the area was sparked by a development project that threatened a large stretch of land near her home. This book is the culmination of five years of research into the history and ecology of the area. Riley's enthusiasm for Colliers Mills and conservation is quite evident throughout the book.

History buffs beware - the history of Colliers Mills gets a very light one chapter treatment that felt padded with the inclusion of a fairly thorough history of the Lenape Indians, bog iron furnaces, and cranberrying. I was pleased, however, to find out what some of the buildings and cellar holes near the entrance to the WMA were. Another notable section in the first chapter was a well written description of charcoaling - one of the main industries in the area.

Colliers Mills is located right on the fringe of the Pine Barrens and as such has a unique ecosystem consisting of species normally found within the Pinelands as well as species found in the forests of Monmouth County. Hardcore nature buffs will find no new material here, but newcomers and those just learning about the Pinelands unique ecosystem will appreciate her well written descriptions of flora and fauna. She thoughtfully divides the chapters up based on the general topic of discussion - starting with birds, moving on to insects, snakes and amphibians, plants and shrubs, trees, and finally mammals. Peppered throughout are various anecdotes and short stories regarding the various creatures and plants she is talking about. It makes for a much more interesting read.

The last chapter deals with what Colliers Mills is today. As a wildlife management area, the place is frequented by hunters who not only come to shoot deer and other animals, but to hone their skills on the many ranges located throughout the area. The author notes that the hunters seem to keep the place cleaner than many others do, and what without the financial support of license fees, etc. that wildlife management areas would simply not exist. She gives short one or two paragraph descriptions of what is and is not allowed at Colliers Mills (boating - in, ATV's - out), which again would be very helpful to someone just learning about the area.

Perhaps the only complaints I can make about the book is the lack of more historic information on the area - for example there was no mention of J. Turner Brakely, the hermit of La-Ha-Way - who knew the woods of Colliers Mills as home - and the book itself. It seems that my copy had a problem with the binding, where several pages seemed glued up past where the spine should stop, making page turning a bit difficult. This is of course understandable since the book is published locally and likely has a limited (and comparatively inexpensive) print run.

Whispers of the Pines is a fun, easy read suited to the Pine Barrens neophyte. While I had expected more history and less botany, I found the most enjoyable part of reading the book was the feeling that I was sharing in someone's love of the Pine Barrens. I'm happy to have this book in my Jerseyana collection.